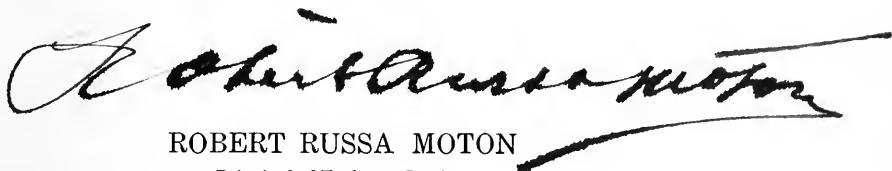


THE NEGRO'S DEBT TO LINCOLN



ROBERT RUSSA MOTON
Principal of Tuskegee Institute

*Reprinted from the Southern
Workman for July 1922*

Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2010 with funding from

The Institute of Museum and Library Services through an Indiana State Library LSTA Grant

THE NEGRO'S DEBT TO LINCOLN*

BY ROBERT RUSSA MOTON

Principal of Tuskegee Institute

WHEN the Pilgrim Fathers set foot upon the shores of America, in 1620, they laid the foundations of our national existence upon the bed-rock of liberty. From that day to this, liberty has been the common bond of our united people. In 1776 the altars of a new nation were set up in the name of liberty, and the flag of freedom unfurled before the nations of the earth. In 1812, in the name of liberty, we bared our youthful might and struck for the freedom of the seas. Again, in '61, when the charter of the nation's birth was assailed, the sons of liberty declared anew the principles of their fathers and liberty became co-extensive with the Union. In '98 the call once more was heard and freedom became co-extensive with the hemisphere. And as we stand in solemn silence here today, there still comes rumbling out of the East the slowly dying echoes of the last great struggle to make freedom co-extensive with the seven seas. Freedom is the life-blood of the nation. Freedom is the heritage bequeathed to all her sons. For all who reflect upon the glory of our Republic, freedom is the underlying philosophy of our national existence.

CONFLICT OF TWO GREAT FORCES

But at the same time another influence was working within the nation. While the Mayflower was riding at anchor preparing for her voyage from Plymouth, another ship had already arrived at Jamestown. The first was to bear the pioneers of freedom—freedom of thought and freedom of conscience; the latter had already borne the pioneers of bondage, a bondage repressive alike to body, mind, and spirit. Here, then, upon American soil, met, within a year, the two great forces that were to shape the destiny of the nation. They developed side by side. Freedom was the great compelling force that dominated all, and, like a great and shining light, beckoned the oppressed of every nation to the hospitality of these shores. But slavery, like a brittle thread, was woven year by year into the fabric of the nation's life. They who for themselves sought liberty and paid the price thereof in precious blood

* Address delivered at the dedication of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D. C., on May 30, 1922. The other speakers were President Harding and former President Taft.

and priceless treasure, somehow still found it possible, while defending its eternal principles for themselves, to withhold that same precious boon from others.

And how shall we account for it, except it be that in the providence of God the black race in America was thrust across the path of the onward-marching white race to demonstrate, not only for America, but for the world, whether the principles of freedom are of universal application, and ultimately to extend its blessings to all mankind.

In the process of time, as was inevitable, these great forces—the forces of liberty and the forces of bondage—met in open conflict upon the field of battle. And how strange it is, through the same over-ruling providence, that children of those who bought and sold their fellows into bondage should be among those who cast aside ties of language, of race, of religion, and even of kinship, in order that a people, not of their own race nor of their own creed or color but sharing a common humanity, should have the same measure of liberty and freedom which they themselves enjoyed.

FREEDOM'S COSTLY SACRIFICE

What a costly sacrifice upon the altar of freedom! How costly the world can never know nor justly estimate. The flower of the nation's manhood and the accumulated treasure of two hundred and fifty years of unremitting toil were offered up; and at length, when the bitter strife was over, when the marshalled hosts on both sides had turned again to broken, desolated firesides, a cruel fate, unsatisfied with the awful toll of four long years of carnage, struck at the nation's head and brought to the dust the already wearied frame of him whose patient fortitude, whose unembittered charity, whose never-failing trust in the guiding hand of God had brought the nation, weltering through a sea of blood, yet one and indivisible, to quietude and peace. On that day, Abraham Lincoln laid down his life for America, the last and costliest sacrifice upon the altar of freedom.

Today, in this inspiring presence, we raise a symbol of gratitude for all who are blest by that sacrifice. But in all this vast assemblage there are none more grateful, none more reverent, than the twelve million black Americans, who, with their fellow-citizens of every race, pay devout homage to him who was for them, more truly than for any other group, the author of their freedom. There is no question that Abraham Lincoln died to save the Union. It is equally true that to the last extremity he defended the rights of the States. But, when the last veteran has stacked

his arms on fame's eternal camping ground; when only the memory of high courage and deep devotion remains to inspire the noble sons of valient fathers; at such a time, the united voice of grateful posterity will say: The claim of greatness for Abraham Lincoln lies in this, that amid doubt and distrust, against the counsel of chosen advisers, in the hour of the nation's utter peril, he put his trust in God and spoke the word that gave freedom to a race, and vindicated the honor of a nation conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.

HAS THE SACRIFICE BEEN JUSTIFIED?

But some one will ask: Has such a sacrifice been justified? Has such martyrdom produced its worthy fruits? I speak for the Negro race. Upon us, more perhaps than upon any other group of the nation, rests the immediate obligation to justify so dear a price for our emancipation. In answer let me review the Negro's past upon American soil. No group has been more loyal. Whether bond or free, the Negro has served alike his country's need. Let it never be omitted from the nation's annals that the blood of a black man—Crispus Attucks—was the first to be shed for this nation's freedom. So again, when the world was threatened with disaster and the deciding hand of America was lifted to stay the peril, her black soldiers were among the first to cross the treacherous sea and the last to leave the trenches. No one is more sensible than the Negro himself of his incongruous position in the great American Republic. But be it recorded, to his everlasting credit, that no failure to reap the full reward of his sacrifices has ever in the least degree qualified his loyalty or cooled his patriotic fervor.

In like manner has he served his country in the pursuits of peace. From the first blows that won the virgin soil from the wilderness to the sudden marvelous expansion of our industry that went so far to win the late war, the Negro has been the nation's greatest single asset in the development of its resources. Especially is this true in the South where his uncomplaining toil sustained the splendors of that life which gave to the nation a Washington and a Jefferson, a Jackson and a Lee. And afterwards, when devastating war had levelled this fair structure with the ground, the labor of the freedmen restored it to its present proportions, more substantial and more beautiful than before.

While all this was going on, in spite of limitations within and restrictions without, he still found the way, through industry, integrity, and thrift, to acquire 22,000,000 acres of land,

600,000 homes, and 45,000 churches. After less than sixty years of freedom Negroes operate 78 banks, 100 insurance companies, and 50,000 other business enterprises with a combined capital of more than \$150,000,000. Besides all this, there are within the race 60,000 professional men, 44,000 school-teachers, and 400 newspapers and magazines; while its general illiteracy has been reduced to twenty-six per cent. Still the Negro race is but at the beginning of its development; so that if anything in its history could justify the sacrifice that has been made, it is this: that a race possessing such remarkable capacity for advancement has taken full advantage of its freedom to develop its latent powers for itself and for the nation. A race that has produced a Frederick Douglass in the midst of slavery, and a Booker Washington in the aftermath of reconstruction, has gone far to justify its emancipation. And the nation where such achievement is possible is full worthy of such heroic sacrifice.

But Lincoln did not die for the Negro alone. He freed a nation as well as a race. Those conflicting forces planted two hundred and fifty years before had slowly divided the nation in spirit, in ideals, and in policy. Passing suddenly beyond the bitterness of controversy, his death served more than war itself to emphasize the enormity of the breach that had developed between the sections. Not until then was there a full realization of the deep significance of his prophetic words: "This nation cannot endure half slave and half free."

That tragic event shocked the conscience of the nation and stirred a great resolve to establish forever the priceless heritage so dearly bought. From that day the noblest minds and hearts, both North and South, were bent on healing the breach and restoring the Union. With a devotion that counted neither personal loss nor gain, Abraham Lincoln held steadfastly to an ideal for the Republic that measured at full value the worth of each race and section, cherishing at the same time the hope that under God all should share alike in the blessings of freedom. Now we rejoice in the far-seeing vision and the unwavering faith that held firmly to its single purpose, even in the midst of reproach, and preserved for all posterity the integrity of the nation.

Lincoln has not died in vain. Slowly through the years that noble spirit has been permeating every section of our land and country. Sixty years ago he stood in lonely grandeur above a torn and bleeding nation, a towering figure of patient righteousness. Today his spirit animates the breasts of millions of his countrymen who unite with us to pay tribute to his lofty character and his immortal deeds.

AN EXPERIMENT IN HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS

And now the whole world turns with anxious hearts and eager eyes toward America. In the providence of God there has been started on these shores the great experiment of the ages—an experiment in human relationships where men and women of every nation, of every race and creed, are thrown together in daily contact. Here we are engaged, consciously or unconsciously, in the great problem of determining how different races can, not only live together in peace, but co-operate in working out a higher and better civilization than has yet been achieved. At the extremes the white and black races face each other. Here in America these two races are charged under God with the responsibility of showing the world how individuals, as well as races, may differ most widely in color and inheritance and at the same time make themselves helpful and even indispensable to each other's progress and prosperity. This is especially true in the South where the black man is found in greatest numbers and where the two races are thrown into closest contact. And there today are found black men and white men who are working together in the spirit of Abraham Lincoln to establish in fact what his death established in principle: that a nation conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal, can endure.

As we gather on this consecrated spot his spirit must rejoice that sectional rancours and racial antagonisms are softening more and more into mutual understanding and effective co-operation. And I like to think that here today, while we dedicate this symbol of our gratitude, the nation is dedicated anew by its own determined will to fulfill to the last letter the task imposed upon it by the martyred dead: that here it highly resolves that the humblest citizen, of whatever color or creed, shall enjoy that equal opportunity and unhampered freedom for which the immortal Lincoln gave the last full measure of devotion.

And the progress of events confirms this view. Step by step has the nation been making its way forward in the spirit of the great Emancipator. And nowhere is this more true than in that section which sixty years ago seemed least in accord with his spirit and purpose, yet at this hour, in many things, is vying with the rest of the nation toward the fulfillment of his hopes.

Twelve million black Americans share in the rejoicing of this hour. As yet, no other name so warms the heart or stirs the depths of their gratitude as that of Abraham Lincoln. To him above all others we owe the privilege of sharing as fellow-citizens in the consecration of this spot and the dedication of this shrine.

In the name of Lincoln twelve million black Americans pledge to the nation their continued loyalty and their unreserved co-operation in every effort to realize in deeds the lofty principles established by his martyrdom. "With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right," may we, one and all, black and white, North and South, strive on to finish the work which he so nobly began: to make America an example for all the world of equal justice and equal opportunity for all.